



OPINION

We all Benefit from Good Day Care for Children

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A recent P-I article asked, "Who's minding day care?" Many answer that parents are responsible for their children's care, that they alone should be worried about their children's experiences from birth to kindergarten and time outside of school after age 5.

But this is 2002. More than 260,000 children under age 12 live in King County. Almost 50 percent spend time in regularly scheduled child care. Staying at home is simply not an option for most working parents.

So let's ask again. Who's minding day care? Who's minding the early care and education of tomorrow's workers, leaders and thinkers?

Certainly, working parents who are looking for quality care at affordable prices mind the state of day care today. No one doubts that service providers with long lists of children waiting for coveted openings mind. Child care workers who are paid the same as parking lot attendants mind. CEOs whose employees can't focus because they are concerned about their children's activities mind. You bet they mind.

Everyone who cares for and about children is troubled by the lack of importance placed on early care and education and activities outside of school. In this global economy, we all should be worried.

"As a nation, we're simply not taking advantage of how much we have learned about early development over the past 40 years," writes Jack P. Shonkoff, editor of "From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development."

"Work and family life are changing dramatically, yet children's needs are not being addressed," Shonkoff says. "This is not about blaming parents, the workplace, communities or government. This is about sharing responsibility, separating fact from fiction and using scientific knowledge to promote the well-being of babies and children."

Research has proved that experiences during the first three years shape children's ability to learn and to relate to others. Will they thrive in school or drop out? Cooperate with their peers or disrupt the class? Will they become criminals or professors? Healthy parents and loving caregivers?

Compassionate citizens and diligent workers? The next great leaders?

High-quality early education and out-of-school programs for children help parents at work.

Employees who are confident about their children's well-being are likely to be more productive and need less time off. In addition, children in these environments do better in school, increasing their chances of getting a living-wage job and becoming self-supporting. A better-educated and skilled work force makes the region more attractive to new and expanding businesses.

Studies show that for every dollar spent on early care now, we save \$7 in rehabilitative services later. High-quality programs result in lower rates of juvenile crime, teen pregnancy and adult incarceration, and decreased abuse of alcohol and drugs.

So, how do we spend that dollar wisely?

Consider these tangible examples of efforts under way to grapple with that question.

Project Lift-Off is working to knit together a network of high-quality, affordable early education and out-of-school opportunities for children and youths in Seattle and King County. Lift-Off is a

partnership of public and private organizations, businesses, grant makers and community leaders.

The Northwest Finance Circle, a joint effort of Project Lift-Off and the Spokane Health Improvement Project, is designing a model system for financing early education and school-age care that assures quality, accessibility and affordability of services whether in urban, suburban or rural communities. Among its goals are child care options that are of higher quality because salaries are adequate to attract and retain trained staff.

TEACH® (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps), administered by the Washington Child Care Resource and Referral Network, provides tuition assistance, paid leave time and salary increases for child care workers who complete college-level training. The result: increased qualifications of providers and reduction in turnover.

These issues of so much importance to little ones require *big* thinking.

Let's drop the flawed assumption that parents alone are responsible and embrace the notion that we all have a stake in children's early care and education. We all suffer from the high cost of child care that is, in many instances, mediocre at best. We bear the effects of low wages for child care workers. We carry the burden of having few options for out-of-school activities.

Let's look at a higher-education-inspired model of financing early care and education that blends together parent fees with a mix of corporate, private and public funds.

Let's establish firm quality standards, enforced by linking aid and funding to meeting performance goals. And let's make this quality rating system public so that parents know what they are buying. Let's better align school learning standards, early care and out-of-school-time programs, and help those providers become better educators.

And let's get started. For the children, for everybody, for the future.